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The Next War

Public in the Dark about Government's Plans for War in Iran

by Daniel Ellsberg

A hidden crisis is under way. Many government insiders are aware of serious plans for war with Iran, but Congress and the public remain largely in the dark. The current situation is very like that of 1964, the year preceding our overt, open-ended escalation of the Vietnam War, and 2002, the year leading up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In both cases, if one or more conscientious insiders had closed the information gap with unauthorized disclosures to the public, a disastrous war might have been averted entirely.

My own failure to act, in time, to that effect in 1964 was pointed out to me by Wayne Morse thirty-five years ago. Morse had been one of only two U.S. senators to vote against the Tonkin Gulf resolution on August 7, 1964. He had believed, correctly, that President Lyndon Johnson would treat the resolution as a congressional declaration of war. His colleagues, however, accepted White House assurances that the president sought "no wider war" and had no intention of expanding hostilities without further consulting them. They believed that they were simply expressing bipartisan support for U.S. air attacks on North Vietnam three days earlier, which the president and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara had told them were in "retaliation" for the "unequivocal," "unprovoked" attack by North Vietnamese torpedo boats on U.S. destroyers "on routine patrol" in "international waters."

Each of the assurances above had been false, a conscious lie. That they were lies, though, had only been revealed to the public seven years later with the publication of the Pentagon Papers, several thousand pages of top-secret documents on U.S. decision-making in Vietnam that I had released to the press. The very first installment, published by the New York Times on June 13, 1971, had proven the official account of the Tonkin Gulf episode to be a deliberate deception.

When we met in September, Morse had just heard me mention to an audience that all of that evidence of fraud had been in my own Pentagon safe at the time of the Tonkin Gulf vote. (By coincidence, I had started work as a special assistant to an assistant secretary of defense the day of the alleged attack—which had not, in fact, occurred at all.) After my talk, Morse, who had been a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1964, said to me, "If you had given those documents to me at the time, the Tonkin Gulf resolution would never have gotten out of committee. And if it had somehow been brought up on the floor of the Senate for a vote, it would never have passed."

He was telling me, it seemed, that it had been in my power, seven years earlier, to avert the deaths so far of 50,000 Americans and millions of Vietnamese, with many more to come. It was not something I was eager to hear. After all, I had just been indicted on what eventually were twelve federal felony counts, with a possible sentence of 115 years in prison, for releasing the Pentagon Papers to the public. I had consciously accepted that prospect in some small hope of shortening the war. Morse was saying that I had missed a real opportunity to prevent the war altogether.

My first reaction was that Morse had overestimated the significance of the Tonkin Gulf resolution and, therefore, the alleged consequences of my not blocking it in August. After all, I felt, Johnson would have found another occasion to get such a resolution passed, or gone ahead without one, even if someone had exposed the fraud in early August.

Years later, though, the thought hit me: What if I had told Congress and the public, later in the fall of 1964, the whole truth about what was coming, with all the documents I had acquired in my job by September, October, or November? Not just, as Morse had suggested, the contents of a few files on the events surrounding the Tonkin Gulf incident-all that I had in early August-but the drawerfuls of critical working papers, memos, estimates, and detailed escalation options revealing the evolving plans of the Johnson Administration for a wider war, expected to commence soon after the election. In short, what if I had put out before the end of the year, whether before or after the November election, all of the classified papers from that period that I did eventually disclose in 1971?

Had I done so, the public and Congress would have learned that Johnson's campaign theme, "we seek no wider war," was a hoax. They would have learned, in fact, that the Johnson Administration had been heading in secret toward essentially the same policy of expanded war that his presidential rival, Senator Barry Goldwater, openly advocated -a policy that the voters overwhelmingly repudiated at the polls.

I would have been indicted then, as I was seven years later, and probably imprisoned. But America would have been at peace during those years. It was only with that reflection, perhaps a decade after the carnage finally ended, that I recognized Morse had been right about my personal share of responsibility for the whole war.

Not just mine alone. Any one of a hundred officials-some of whom foresaw the whole catastrophe-could have told the hidden truth to Congress, with documents. Instead, our silence made us all accomplices in the ensuing slaughter.

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The run-up to the 1964 Tonkin Gulf resolution was almost exactly parallel to the run-up to the 2002 Iraq war resolution.

In both cases, the president and his top Cabinet officers consciously deceived Congress and the public about a supposed short-run threat in order to justify and win support for carrying out preexisting offensive plans against a country that was not a near-term danger to the United States. In both cases, the deception was essential to the political feasibility of the program precisely because expert opinion inside the government foresaw costs, dangers, and low prospects of success that would have doomed the project politically if there had been truly informed public discussion beforehand. And in both cases, that necessary deception could not have succeeded without the obedient silence of hundreds of insiders who knew full well both the deception and the folly of acting upon it.

One insider aware of the Iraq plans, and knowledgeable about the inevitably disastrous result of executing those plans, was Richard Clarke, chief of counterterrorism for George W. Bush and adviser to three presidents before him. He had spent September 11, 2001, in the White House, coordinating the nation's response to the attacks. He reports in his memoir, *Against All Enemies*, discovering the next morning, to his amazement, that most discussions there were about attacking Iraq.

Clarke told Bush and Rumsfeld that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, or with its perpetrator, Al Qaeda. As Clarke said to Secretary of State Colin Powell that afternoon, "Having been attacked by al Qaeda, for us now to go bombing Iraq in response"-which Rumsfeld was already urging-"would be like our invading Mexico after the Japanese attacked us at Pearl Harbor."

Actually, Clarke foresaw that it would be much worse than that. Attacking Iraq not only would be a crippling distraction from the task of pursuing the real enemy but would in fact aid that enemy: "Nothing America could have done would have provided al Qaeda and its new generation of cloned groups a better recruitment device than our unprovoked invasion of an oil-rich Arab country."

I single out Clarke-by all accounts among the best of the best of public servants-only because of his unique role in counterterrorism and because, thanks to his illuminating 2004 memoir, we know his thoughts at that time, and, in particular, the intensity of his anguish and frustration. Such a memoir allows us, as we read each new revelation, to ask a simple question: What difference might it have made to events if he had told us this at the time?

Clarke was not, of course, the only one who could have told us, or told Congress. We know from other accounts that both of his key judgments-the absence of linkage between Al Qaeda and Saddam and his correct prediction that "attacking Iraq would actually make America less secure and strengthen the broader radical Islamic terrorist movement"-were shared by many professionals in the CIA, the State Department, and the military.

Yet neither of these crucial, expert conclusions was made available to Congress or the public, by Clarke or anyone else, in the eighteen-month run-up to the war. Even as they heard the president lead the country to the opposite, false impressions, toward what these officials saw as a disastrous, unjustified war, they felt obliged to keep their silence.

Costly as their silence was to their country and its victims, I feel I know their mind-set. I had long prized my own identity as a keeper of the president's secrets. In 1964 it never even occurred to me to break the many secrecy agreements I had signed, in the Marines, at the Rand Corporation, in the Pentagon. Although I already knew the Vietnam War was a mistake and based on lies, my loyalties then were to the secretary of defense and the president (and to my promises of secrecy, on which my own career as a president's man depended). I'm not proud that it took me years of war to awaken to the higher loyalties owed by every government official to the rule of law, to our soldiers in harm's way, to our fellow citizens, and, explicitly, to the Constitution, which every one of us had sworn an oath "to support and uphold."

It took me that long to recognize that the secrecy agreements we had signed frequently conflicted with our oath to uphold the Constitution. That conflict arose almost daily, unnoticed by me or other officials, whenever we were secretly aware that the president or other executive officers were lying to or misleading Congress. In giving priority, in effect, to my promise of secrecy-ignoring my constitutional obligation-I was no worse or better than any of my Vietnam-era colleagues, or those who later saw the Iraq war approaching and failed to warn anyone outside the executive branch.

Ironically, Clarke told Vanity Fair in 2004 that in his own youth he had ardently protested "the complete folly" of the Vietnam War and that he "wanted to get involved in national security in 1973 as a career so that Vietnam didn't happen again." He is left today with a sense of failure:

It's an arrogant thing to think, Could I have ever stopped another Vietnam? But it really filled me with frustration that when I saw Iraq coming I wasn't able to do anything. After having spent thirty years in national security and having been in some senior-level positions you would think that I might be able to have some influence, some tiny influence. But I couldn't have any.

But it was not too arrogant, I believe, for Clarke to aspire to stop this second Vietnam personally. He actually had a good chance to do so, throughout 2002, the same one Senator Morse had pointed out to me.

Instead of writing a memoir to be cleared for publication in 2004, a year after Iraq had been invaded, Clarke could have made his knowledge of the war to come, and its danger to our security, public before the war. He could have supported his testimony with hundreds of files of documents from his office safe and computer, to which he then still had access. He could have given these to both the media and the then Democratic-controlled Senate.

"If I had criticized the president to the press as a special assistant" in the summer of 2002, Clarke told Larry King in March 2004, "I would have been fired within an hour." That is undoubtedly true. But should that be the last word on that course? To be sure, virtually all bureaucrats would agree with him, as he told King, that his only responsible options at that point were either to resign quietly or to "spin" for the White House to the press, as he did. But that is just the working norm I mean to question here.

His unperceived alternative, I wish to suggest, was precisely to court being fired for telling the truth to the public, with documentary evidence, in the summer of 2002. For doing that, Clarke would not only have lost his job, his clearance, and his career as an executive official; he would almost surely have been prosecuted, and he might have gone to prison. But the controversy that ensued would not have been about hindsight and blame. It would have been about whether war on Iraq would make the United States safer, and whether it was otherwise justified.

That debate did not occur in 2002-just as a real debate about war in Vietnam did not occur in 1964-thanks to the disciplined reticence of Clarke and many others. Whatever his personal fate, which might have been severe, his disclosures would have come before the war. Perhaps, instead of it.

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We face today a crisis similar to those of 1964 and 2002, a crisis hidden once again from the public and most of Congress. Articles by Seymour Hersh and others have revealed that, as in both those earlier cases, the president has secretly directed the completion, though not yet execution, of military operational plans-not merely hypothetical "contingency plans" but constantly updated plans, with movement of forces and high states of readiness, for prompt implementation on command-for attacking a country that, unless attacked itself, poses no threat to the United States: in this case, Iran.

According to these reports, many high-level officers and government officials are convinced that our president will attempt to bring about regime change in Iran by air attack; that he and his vice president have long been no less committed, secretly, to doing so than they were to attacking Iraq; and that his secretary of defense is as madly optimistic about the prospects for fast, cheap military success there as he was in Iraq.

Even more ominously, Philip Giraldi, a former CIA official, reported in *The American Conservative* a year ago that Vice President Cheney's office had directed contingency planning for "a large-scale air assault on Iran employing both conventional and tactical nuclear weapons" and that "several senior Air Force officers" involved in the planning were "appalled at the implications of what they are doing- that Iran is being set up for an unprovoked nuclear attack-but no one is prepared to damage his career by posing any objection."

Several of Hersh's sources have confirmed both the detailed operational planning for use of nuclear weapons against deep underground Iranian installations and military resistance to this prospect, which led several senior officials to consider resigning. Hersh notes that opposition by the Joint Chiefs in April led to White House withdrawal of the "nuclear option"-for now, I would say. The operational plans remain in existence, to be drawn upon for a "decisive" blow if the president deems it necessary.

Many of these sources regard the planned massive air attack-with or without nuclear weapons-as almost sure to be catastrophic for the Middle East, the position of the United States in the world, our troops in Iraq, the world economy, and U.S. domestic security. Thus they are as deeply concerned about these prospects as many other insiders were in the year before the Iraq invasion. That is why, unlike in the lead-up to Vietnam or Iraq, some insiders are leaking to reporters. But since these disclosures-so far without documents and without attribution-have not evidently had enough credibility to raise public alarm, the question is whether such officials have yet reached the limit of their responsibilities to our country.

Assuming Hersh's so-far anonymous sources mean what they say-that this is, as one puts it, "a juggernaut that has to be stopped"-I believe it is time for one or more of them to go beyond fragmentary leaks unaccompanied by documents. That means doing what no other active official or consultant has ever done in a timely way: what neither Richard Clarke nor I nor anyone else thought of doing until we were no longer officials, no longer had access to current documents, after bombs had fallen and thousands had died, years into a war. It means going outside executive channels, as officials with contemporary access, to expose the president's lies and oppose his war policy publicly before the war, with unequivocal evidence from inside.

Simply resigning in silence does not meet moral or political responsibilities of officials rightly "appalled" by the thrust of secret policy. I hope that one or more such persons will make the sober decision-accepting sacrifice of clearance and career, and risk of prison-to disclose comprehensive files that convey, irrefutably, official, secret estimates of costs and prospects and dangers of the military plans being considered. What needs disclosure is the full internal controversy, the secret critiques as well as the arguments and claims of advocates of war and nuclear "options"-the Pentagon Papers of the Middle East. But unlike in 1971, the ongoing secret debate should be made available before our war in the region expands to include Iran, before the sixty-one-year moratorium on nuclear war is ended violently, to give our democracy a chance to foreclose either of those catastrophes.

The personal risks of doing this are very great. Yet they are not as great as the risks of bodies and lives we are asking daily of over 130,000 young Americans-with many yet to join them-in an unjust war. Our country has urgent need for comparable courage, moral and civil courage, from its public servants. They owe us the truth before the next war begins.

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